

Child sexual abuse, social work and feminism

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Child sexual abuse is subject to serious concern and moral panic in contemporary society, though a historical perspective suggests that this intensification of concern is relatively recent. There are nineteenth and twentieth century historical sources in which the idea of sexual relations between adults and children has been celebrated and validated or at least imagined to be the product of the child's sexual demeanour as much as the desires of the adult. The campaigning journalist and purity activist W T Stead, when writing of his abduction of a child as a journalistic stunt demonstration of 'white slavery' in 1885, was quite ready to perceive sexual precocity amongst children. He sometimes referred to 'fallen' children as 'brazen harlots', and was quite willing to believe that children were sometimes as much to blame for vice as their customers. Incest or 'pederasty' were never normalised in practice – as Louise Jackson's work has shown, such acts were often subject to condemnation and policing within poor communities.¹ But these sexual desires and acts were not always subject to the same levels of concern that can be seen in the late twentieth century.

We see some extraordinarily tolerant responses, to what in today's terms would be named child sexual abuse. Historians writing of the sexual practices of the British empire notes that paedophiles were tolerated, both in colonial service and in the church, for the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth. Ron Hyam argues that 'Popular culture continued to validate a strong emotional interest in boyhood until well into the 1920s.'² Oscar Wilde's testimony in his 1895 trial is as much about the love that might exist between adults and youths as it is about homosexual love. He talked of the purity of 'a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan... It is that deep spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect... There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an older and a younger man.' Versions of sexual interest in children were sometimes validated and celebrated.

¹ Louise Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England* (2000)

² Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*, (1990)

Another writer on 'child assault', this time from the interwar period, did not celebrate this kind of desire, but did argue that 'the case of the moral pervert is similar to that of the victim of an infectious disease. We do not blame those who suffer from smallpox or scarlet fever, but we do restrain them from spreading their diseases – we isolate and treat them.'³ This is a relatively rare mention of this problem, which remained a submerged element of child abuse. A major history of child abuse published in 1985, for example, made no mention of sexual abuse.⁴ There was very little attention to sexual abuse as a component of child abuse until the 1970s. The long standing child protection movement dating from the 1850s was mostly focused on child neglect and violence, rather than sexual components. We can perceive a growing state interest in both neglect and cruelty, though the voluntary sector still dominated.

Paedophile activism became openly possible in the 1970s amongst those involved in radical sexual politics, as Gay Liberation briefly offered a shared platform of homosexuals and paedophiles. The magazine *Gay Left*, for example, published a letter in early 1976 from a paedophile, giving his name and address, and arguing that the 'widespread feeling against child and adolescent lovers is not so much sexism as ageism.' The gay demand that the age of consent for gay sex be reduced to 16 or even lower seemed to give paedophiles and gay liberation a shared platform, though many gay activists remained deeply critical.

Around the late 1970s, there was a divorce of gay rights and other sexual activism from paedophilic organisations. Rising vilification of paedophilia as feminist perspectives gained institutional force in social work and policing in the 1970s and 1980s. The rise of feminism in the early 70s problematised male violence, and this was extended to cover sexual violence against children as the decade went on. There were some high profile political campaigns about male violence, and some change at grassroots, but these were very slow to impact on cultures of routine sexual harassment in workplaces. Sexual harassment was established more clearly in legal terms as a form of discrimination in 1986, in an amendment to the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975. Nonetheless, there was little legislative attention to problems of sexual harassment until the 1990s, and little sign of culture change in workplaces until the twenty first century.

³ Child Assault, by Joyce Pollard, Sept 1924, p. 128

⁴ N Parton, The Politics of Child Abuse, (1985)

British public opinion did slowly begin to acknowledge the figure of the 'child molester' in the 1970s, who was increasingly understood as organised into rings and associated with new technologies such as CB radios. After some high profile murders, an association began to be made between a sexual interest in children and crimes of abduction and murder – this represents the early formation of a paedophilic identity that was increasingly being understood in strongly negative terms, and in ways that made it increasingly difficult for individuals to acknowledge and find alternative channels for their sexual feelings towards children. The production and distribution of child pornography was criminalised in the 1978 Protection of Children Act - though its possession was not illegal until 1988.

Social workers' identification of 'family abuse' in the 1970s, however, failed to find support in public opinion. Social workers' concerns were often understood as excessively political and feminist in ideology, confirmed by the Orkney and Rochdale scandals in the early 90s, where perceived child sexual abuse was found to be unfounded. Despite evidence that child sexual abuse takes place predominantly amidst relatives, the paedophile was located outside the home.

The uncovering of Irish paedophile priests, Belgian paedophile rings, and the arrest of Gary Glitter in 1999, added to this willingness to see deviant *individuals* as likely offenders in this area. The Belgium paedophile murderer Marc Dutroux served as a 'folk devil', to the detriment of attention to institutional failures in this area. There was a deep unwillingness to pay attention to the institutional conditions in organisations which made such offending possible.

The twenty first century has seen a condensation of traits into one vehicle, the paedophile. The paedophile has become understood as organised, obsessive, a predatory stranger who invades families or abuses children in non-domestic settings, who used pornography, who might act serially over many years, and who was predisposed not simply to abuse but also to murder children. Paedophiles were linked to new technologies – to email and internet bulletin boards, and more recently to chat rooms.

Concerns over paedophilia were given new purchase by the creation of the Sex Offenders Register in 1997. Sarah Payne's murder in 2000 spurred *The New of the World* and other media to mount campaigns to 'name and shame', and there was enormous public

resonance for this, with vigilante action in some locations. Ironically, the moral panic and emergence of the paedophile as a 'folk devil' has frequently obscured the roots of child sexual abuse within families, and through the sexualisation of children in fashion and popular culture.